INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

HABITAT

[p. 1]

Morphology

THE homeland of the Ovimbundu is the Benguela Highland in central Angola. Strictly speaking the Highland comprises those regions which have an elevation of 1,500 metres (about 4,920 feet) or more. A glance at the accompanying map will show how closely the territory inhabited by the Ovimbundu corresponds with the extent of the Highland proper. The adjoining regions, in which the Ovimbundu also live, nowhere have an elevation inferior to 1,000 metres (about 3,280 feet). Geographically the region of the Highland is a part of the South African sub-continental plateau. The ridges of the Highland form the plateau's highest north-western portion.

Geologically this sub-continental plateau is one of the oldest parts of the earth's surface. The north-western portion, with which this study is concerned, has remained above sea-level from before the time of fossils. The vast slab of primeval crystalline rock which forms the foundation of the plateau often outcrops in the form of isolated rocks of unusual appearance,[1] or in massive peaks, the highest of which, in the western escarpment, reach an elevation of nearly 9,000 feet (2,850 metres).[2] Some of these outcrops remain bare, some are hidden by laterite and some by soil formed from decomposition of rock.

Among the sediments which overlie these primeval rocks there are unfossiliferous sandstones, conglomerates, and others, all of which are considered to be of Palaeozoic age. Deposits of iron are numerous, many of which were once worked by the Ovimbundu or by their predecessors. Much of the soil has been greatly im-

[1] Several of these rocks have caught the attention of travellers and writers. *Luvili* (north-west of Bailundu) is perhaps the most striking of all. Cameron said that the natives called it 'The Devil's Finger', a name I have not been able to verify. *Nganda* and *Kawe* are near the railway between Nova Lisboa and Vila Robert Williams. A journalist recently gave them the name of 'Cleopatra's Breasts'.

[2] One of the peaks of the ridge called *Moko* (The Knife) is the highest, but no complete survey has been made.

there was a great metal industry in Viye, where hoes were made for trade with the interior; later the wholesale manufacture of hoes was taken over by Ndulu, where there are the best and most easily accessible deposits of iron. In exchange for hoes they received palm-oil or cattle from other regions, or salt, rum, or goods from the coast. Other regional specialisations were :- Kasongi and the Sele country for palm-oil, Cikuma for beeswax, cattle from Ngalangi, Kalukembe, and, further south, corn-meal from Ciyaka, Civula and Bailundu.(1)

SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE

KINSHIP AND DESCENT

The Ovimbundu appear to have a system of double descent which has not yet been fully reported and analysed, and whose nature is not very clear from existing accounts. The following outline is based on information given by Childs,(2) who unfortunately details the functions but not the composition of the kin groups concerned. In a review(3) of Childs' book, Barnes has formulated a descent system which would be congruent with Childs' description, and his suggestions are outlined here.

The epata

Childs translates *epata* as "blood relatives", and his use of the term suggests that it may have either a general or a limited sense. Thus he writes (p.42): "Nearly all of the villagers belong to the same *epata* or extended family, which includes both lines of descent. Most of them belong to the father's family *(oluse)*, and the mother's family *(oluina)* may also be represented." And, in another context, (p.44): "When an Ocimbundu speaks of his *epata* (family) in the sense of a large and widespread organization with a recognized head....it is generally his *oluina* [mother's family] to which he refers."

The oluse and the oluina

Every Ocimbundu belongs in the first instance to two distinct kin groupings: the *oluse*, to whom he is related through his father, and the *oluina* to whom he is related through his mother. Uterine brothers and sisters belong to the same *oluse* and *oluina*, but to the male and female side respectively, according to sex. (see below.) A difficulty has arisen because both Hambly(4) and Childs appear to regard *both groups* as bilateral. Hambly states explicitly that the *oluse*, or *epata lia tate* (family of my father) includes *all* relatives on the father's side, and the *oluina* or *epata lia nai* (family of my mother) *all* relatives on the mother's side. Childs writes (p.45) "Bearing in mind *their bilateral nature* ..... the functions of [the *oluse* and the *oluina*] may be summarised...". But from his summary it is obvious that the *oluse* and the *oluina* cannot be bilateral groups, neither can they have parallel descent systems of any kind. Marriage is patrilocal, and the *oluse* forms a local unit while the *oluina* is

(1) Childs, 1949, p.205.
(2) 1949, pp.42-6.
(3) Man, September 1950, p.127.
(4) Op.cit., pp.191-2.

3: Hambly E-5 (1929-1930) 1934 FP13 Mbundu FP13

175 [316] [325] Serpa Pinto saw shafts for the working of iron ore in the neighborhood of Cubango. The ore was mixed with charcoal and smelted in shallow pits. It is stated that the iron was sometimes tempered with ox-grease and salt. The bellows are of the type made at Elende (I, p. 128). Of the tempering process I have no confirmation.

175 787 [764] Somewhere near Bihé Serpa Pinto saw the ceremony of questioning a corpse which was made to sway to and fro, the people believing all the while that it does so without human intervention. The diviner declared that the soul of a dead person will tell who caused the death (I, p. 130). I observed and photographed this ceremony (Plate XLV, Fig. 1).

[695] The ordeal of the poison cup is described; blood-letting, and divination by shaking articles in a basket are also mentioned. Pinto says that in the articles that appear uppermost the diviner reads what his hearers are desirous of learning of the past, present, or future. Sorcery and rain-making are likewise briefly mentioned (I, p. 132). The divination basket, the poison ordeal, and rain-making, are Umbundu cultural traits today.

171 224 Here Pinto illustrates the existing practice of mounting the skulls of animals killed by a hunter on a pole in the village. There is a further reference to this custom among the Ambuellas (I, p. 333). These instances, combined with those personally noted, give a wide distribution for the practice (I, p. 177).

175 [304] Pinto saw the operation of tooth mutilation among the Luimba. The operation was performed with a knife which was struck by repeated light blows (I, p. 209).

[711] Pinto illustrates arrowheads in use in 1879 (I, pp. 277, 346). These are exactly the same as those made and used in 1929 (Plate XVII, Figs. 1–9).

[412] Axes used by the Luchazi are sketched with a detail that shows the old forms to persist without alteration (II, p. 36).

[321] Water-pipes made from horns and gourds by the Luina of eastern Angola are of the forms now used in that region, also by the Ovimbundu of the present day (II, pp. 33, 37).

175 114 For use in checking and supplementing my observations Serpa Pinto's book was found to be of the greatest service, though the precise locality was sometimes difficult to identify. This explorer, in common with others, scattered his ethnological observations among descriptions of the route and botanical, zoological, and other notes.

Lux traveled from Loanda due east, following the Kwanza on the northern bank between 9° and 10° S. Lat., and so into Lunda.